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RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0026
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000167

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: AN ELECTION PRIMER FOR INDIA'S NEXT BIG VOTE: SHOWTIME IN KARNATAKA

REF: Chennai 119 and previous

¶1. Summary: Voters in the South Indian state of Karnataka head to the polls in May to select 224 members of the state's legislative assembly. More than 10,000 candidates are vying for these seats in elections that will take place in three stages, from May 10 to May 22. The main contest will take place between India's two largest national parties, the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The local Janata Dal-Secular (JDS) party is likely to place third, and other other parties, such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bhujan Samaj Party (BSP), may play an important role, as well. All eyes are on Karnataka for this election, as India's chattering classes ponder the 2009 national elections and whether the Congress Party can stem the tide of painful state-level electoral losses it has suffered in recent months.

¶2. This is the first of a series of cables on these elections, and seeks to explain the basic framework of the polls. Subsequent cables will offer more detailed analysis and a touch of local color.
End Summary.

An election in three acts

¶3. For the first time in Karnataka, elections for the state's legislative assembly will take place in three stages (balloting in previous years occurred in only two stages). The first stage, which will take place on May 10, will consist of the 89 constituencies in the state's southern districts. The second stage will cover 66 constituencies in the state's central and coastal districts on May 16. Voters in the 69 constituencies in northern Karnataka cast their ballots on May 22.

¶4. Election authorities will deploy 39,758 electronic voting machines for the polls, which will allow almost immediate tabulation of results. As is the normal electoral procedure in India, however, the results will be tabulated and announced simultaneously for all three phases only on May 25.

A cast of 10,000

¶5. More than 10,000 candidates are vying for the legislative assembly's 224 seats. As elsewhere in India, Karnataka's is a first-past-the-post system, with voters casting their ballots for candidates representing specific constituencies. A party needs to win 113 seats to claim a majority that will allow it to form a government on its own. In typical parliamentary fashion, if no party wins an outright majority of seats, parties may attempt to cobble together a coalition that can command a majority.

The real players

¶16. Although candidates from a dizzying array of parties will contest the elections, most observers expect that either the Congress Party or the BJP will claim the largest number of seats, with the JDS -- a local party headed by former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda -- coming in a distant third. Relative newcomers to Karnataka such as the SP or Mayawati's BSP are unlikely to win more seats than the other three parties, but may demonstrate significant strength in particular areas to tip the results in some constituencies or to play an important role as king-maker if neither the Congress nor the BJP can muster a majority, which seems likely.

Knowing the audience

¶17. Politics in Karnataka has long been dominated by members of two castes, the Lingayyats and the Vokkaligas, who comprise nearly half of the electorate by some estimates. Vokkaligas, traditionally farmers, dominate in southern Karnataka and have tended to divide their loyalties between the Congress Party the JDS. The Lingayyats, traditionally traders, are more numerous in northern Karnataka, and tend to support the BJP.

¶18. Members of the "backward castes," Dalits, and Adivasis (or "scheduled tribes") form close to 30 percent of the state's population, and are spread across constituencies. They tend to split their votes among Congress, SP, and BSP. Muslims and Christians comprise approximately 15 percent of the electorate, and

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tend to support Congress.

Special actors

¶19. Karnataka's electoral map has, quite literally, been redrawn since the most recent election in 2004. The redistricting process (known as "delimitation" in the local political vernacular) altered 52 constituencies, but did not change the total number of seats in the legislative assembly. The number of seats in the urban areas of the state increased substantially, with the greater Bangalore area now deciding 28 seats, compared with 16 in the previous election.

¶110. The number of constituencies reserved for Dalit candidates increased from 33 to 36, while seats reserved for Adivasis jumped from 2 to 15. The 51 seats reserved for candidates from these groups comprise 23 percent of the total, potentially giving these socially disadvantaged groups a decisive role in forthcoming elections.

The prequel

¶111. In the April 2004 election, the BJP won the plurality of seats, with 79 -- an electoral first for the party in South India. The Congress Party was "completely mauled" in the words of one political scientist, winning only 64 seats in a state where it had tended to control more than 100. Perhaps the big winner, though, was the JDS, which pulled in 59 seats and joined Congress in the state's governing coalition. The JDS then split and a faction formed a new government with the BJP, with Deve Gowda's son H.D. Kumaraswamy as Chief Minister. The JDS-BJP government is remembered mainly for its squabbling, which eventually led to its collapse in October 2007 when the JDS refused to hand over the post of Chief Minister to the BJP halfway through its term, as called for in the coalition agreement. The parties managed to reform their coalition in November, with the BJP's B.S. Yediyurappa as Chief Minister -- making him the first BJP Chief Minister in South India -- but that arrangement fell apart within a week, leading to this month's elections.

Comment: A tragedy or triumph for Congress?

¶12. This is a very important election for the Congress Party. It has been stung in a series of state elections across the country in recent months, and it desperately needs a strong showing to garner some sort of momentum in the run-up to next year's national elections. With the embarrassing mess its two main rivals made of Karnataka's government and its historical strength in the state, many are expecting Congress to do well. If it fails to meet these buoyant expectations, however, the party could be in serious trouble.

¶13. The BJP hopes to carry momentum from its resounding victories in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh last December. It was anxious that the Karnataka polls be held earlier rather than later in expectation that it will gain from a sympathy factor resulting from what many see as the JDS betrayal of its coalition agreement. The Karnataka election is also seen as a bellwether by many analysts because it is the last big state to go the polls before the Congress Party and the UPA decide on the timing of the national elections. If the Congress Party fares poorly, its UPA allies will become even more skittish and, while unlikely to break with the UPA coalition, will more aggressively begin to distance themselves from a stumbling Congress Party. End Comment.

¶14. This cable was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.

HOPPER